The Feminine Mystique in Dental Education: A Feminist's Challenge

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I am going to engage in a pere­
on—controversial disputation.
I know that is what I am doing and I want you to know that I know. I will not speak to specific strategies or tactics to recruit, retain, and advance women in dental education. Rather, my comments will be more conceptual. My tone will strike passion, for I feel strongly about this issue. I may not be as substantive as either you or I would like, but I will be expressing my personally reflected views on this vitally important topic. My goal is two-fold: first, to express one dental educator’s perspective on a problem in dental education, and secondly, to motivate other dental educators to pursue, in substantive and tangible ways, redressing that problem.

Being a Feminist
I am a feminist and am here today to challenge the feminine mystique in dental education. In 1963 Betty Friedan sparked a major revolution in our society with her publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. A “mystique” is a complex of beliefs and/or attitudes around an idea having a meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intellect. Ms. Friedan argued in her book, to me persuasively, that mystical beliefs of the feminine have overwhelmed our society. The feminine mystique says the root of women’s problems is that women envy men and try to be like men rather than accept their own nature, their femininity; which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. The book, as a disclosure of the real nature of femininity, became a vision for women in much the same way Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech became a vision for Afro-Americans. With Ms. Friedan’s leadership, the movement was galvanized by the founding, in 1966 of the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW was established with a declared goal of moving to true equality for all women in America and an equal partnership of the sexes. The movement to liberate women in this country from the feminine mystique began. I am a feminist and a member of the National Organization for Women. Note that is not “of” but “for” women. I proudly wear my tee-shirt that proclaims, “a man of quality is not threatened by women for equality; he is, to be a feminist is to assert:

• Women and men are equal in virtue.
• Women and men are equal in dignity.
• Women and men are equal in respect.
• Women and men are equal in potential.
• Women and men are equal in rights.
• Women and men are equal in freedom.
• Women and men are equal in authority.

Women and men ought to be equal in opportunity.
• Women and men ought to be equal in responsibility.
• Women and men ought to be equal in obligations.

To be a feminist is to believe that women, as men, should have an environment that facilitates the realization of their full potential as human beings.

To be a feminist is to believe that every political ideology, every social structure, every religious faith, every organizational configuration, every cultural assumption, every government bureaucracy, and all policies, practices, and procedures must support the notion of the radical equality of women and men, the full humanism of both sexes.

To be a feminist is to fully support and endorse the unique, influential, important, demanding, and essential role of women in society.
To be a feminist is to actively engage oneself in tangible ways in helping women to be all they can be and all they want to be.

I am a feminist and I reject the narrow mystique in society, in dentistry, and in dental education.

What is the feminist mystique in society? The belief that women arc not, cannot be, and should not be equal partners with men in the profession; that women in the profession are an interesting phenomena, but are only incidental; that women are not essential to the making of the profession; that women in the profession are a most insightful trend, and that must be joined in a complementary synergism, with the total human and I will add human institutions, to be attained.

While the male eminence is on:
- Fairness
- Justice
- Innovation
- Rights
- Separation
- Independence
- Competition

The female eminence is on:
- Care
- Love
- Intimacy
- Self Sacrifice
- Others
- Responsibilities
- Attachments
- Interdependence
- Cooperation

Riane Eisler in her classic account of history, The Chatter and the Child, located in the history of the human race through the prism of gender, she used the metaphor of the blade to symbolize the cutting, penetrating, and competitive character of the male and the chalice so as to represent the receptive and cooperative qualities of the female. Her study suggests that men are oriented toward forming hierarchically organized arrangements based in power, while women are predisposed to organizing networks based on communication. Blending the characteristics of the male and the female is understated in androgyny. Literally, "androgyny" is from the Greek for "male and female." Androgyny is men and women existing side by side in the same individual. Joyce Treybilarg argues in the Journal of Social Philosophy that men and women should attempt to develop personal traits and engage in activities traditionally assigned to the other sex, a single ideal for all.

Aristotle, in so far as he advocates shared roles, is now the public official policy of Sweden has been, "every individual regardless of sex, shall have the same occupational opportunities, not only for education and employment, but also for her or his own financial support, as well as shared responsibility for child rearing and housework.

An androgynous culture, an androgynous profession, and an androgynous college of dentistry, are in view as in which the uniqueness of the male and female students, ratios among faculty are lagging behind. Possibly they are only observing a historical response that is due to women gaining credentials in some academically, and possibly we will catch up. I am not optimistic.

Teresa Deeds in a recent issue of the Chronicle of the American Association of Women Dentists, reported on a survey conducted in 1989 of the membership of organizations of women that address problems or important issues facing women dentists today. The most consistent issue focused on the lack of role models, female leadership in academia, and parity.

The metaphor of the "glass ceiling," has been widely utilized to symbolize the invisible barriers. Eric Solomon reported last year in the Chronicle of the American Association of Women Dentists, that "78.5% of our nation's dental graduates were women. In 1981, only 15% of the population of 15,000 student dentists were women. Today 53% of the population of 22,000 student dentists are women. Nationally, our current first year class is 38% women, an increase from five years ago. Today in our College of Dentistry, 50% of our dental students would be female. The number of women enrolled in dental education is increasing at a much faster rate than men.

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The cry for myth, and dental education requires the balance of the male contributions in education and research, and a lack of adequate numbers of women faculty members to serve as role models for growing numbers of women student dentists.

The Value of the Androgyrous

I believe that women and men are different, in fact, I know they are! I applaud the differences! Each sex has its essential qualities and strengths to offer to society and to women's organizations. Dentistry and dental education require the balance of these qualities, and I believe the profession is to be as strong as it can and should be.

Carol Gilligan, working with the late Kohut, has developed a theory of the development of self, specifically the development of women and of men, and the differences existing between them. Her research at Harvard, which is supported by other gender - focused research, points out the uniqueness of the male and the female that must be joined to a complementary relationship; that the strength of the total human, and I will add human institutions, is to be attained.

What is androgyny? It is a most insightful trend, and one that must be joined in a complementary synergism, with the total human and I will add human institutions, to be attained.

The logical extension of Aristotelian principle of equality, attributed to men, is to be treated equally, not as equals, while unequal must be treated unequally in proportion to their differences. But, what constitutes equality or inequality in treatment? The usual answer of the formal principle of equality is to say that the differences between individuals must be relevant in the face of questions.

The lack of an appropriate number of women in our colleges and dental education is a problem. Inadequate numbers of women leaders roles in our colleges is a problem. Failure to acknowledge the imperative of a balancing of men and women - failure to acknowledge the valuable role of women in leadership, and failure to affirm those ideals, are part of the feminist mystique. I reject and encourage you to reject this mystique!

However, I believe that a significant number of faculty members and leaders in dental education subscribe to the feminist mystique and are not committed to an androgynous culture in dental education. I hope I am wrong, but my observations lead me to conclude that the feminist mystique is alive and well in the clinics and classrooms of our colleges.

Taking Afferent Actions

Affirming an androgynous college leads to a commitment to leveling the playing field for women, to an intense and passionate interest and concern for recruiting, retaining, and advancing women in dental education, and to taking affirmative action as an equal opportunity employer. We are members of universities that are "equal opportunity employers." Federal law supports and upholds the equal sexual identity. However, there is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality.

We as men have paid a high price for the "control" and "power" we have traditionally exercised over women. I as a feminist believe that the feminist movement's efforts to transform women into autonomous, responsible decision makers is ultimately beneficial to men. For me, such will make our liberation possible. We are members of universities that are "equal opportunity employers." Federal law supports and upholds the equal sexual identity. However, there is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality. I want to be sure I am not mistaken.

I am not an altruistic reasoning, a matter of principle, to the merits of women's rights and women's liberation. A Roman, for reasons of altruism and virtuous, I believe that if I am making the transition to become a total person, I must act on what I consider to be true and just. The same approach that I have taken toward justifying my feminism, I hope I am wrong, but my observations lead me to conclude that the feminist mystique is alive and well in the clinics and classrooms of our colleges.
today with regard to the sexes, consider the stochastic inequalities perpetuated against women for generations, yes, even centuries? Rawls explained his concept of distributive justice by arguing that social and economic inequities are to be arranged so that they are both reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage and attached to positions and offices open to all. What does "justice as fairness," to use Rawls terms, require today in order to create a level playing field for women?

I strongly believe that to resolve the problem I have identified, inadequate numbers of women faculty members and administrators to balance our male-oriented approaches, and to serve as effective role models for our female students, that we must take affirmative and affirmative action! While our universities publicly proclaim their allegiance to the concept, all too often in academic dentistry I see and hear the "good ole boys network." Not only because of our sheer numbers, but also because of our communication networks, we men call men to identify other men for positions which become available. We must address ourselves into believing that the male applicant is the more qualified, for any number of reasons, for the position that is available. It is not always true that opportunities attract; in most instances in hiring, we gravitate to sameness. This is not affirmative action. This is not Rawls explicated his concept of distributive justice by arguing that so-called sex-based inequities are perpetuated against women for generations.

Today we are attempting to address "justice as fairness" in meas­uring women by compensating for the wrongs of the past. We call our attempts affirmative action. As a society we say we will act to redress the rule and the value of women (and minorities) by actively searching for women, and giving preferential treatment to women in hiring decisions; all in an attempt to redress the systemic, indigenous, and insidious inequalities that have and continue to exist in our culture and its institutions.

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